



First United Church of Oak Park

Three Days in the Belly of a Fish

Jonah 1

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One of the most frustrating things about this pandemic is that it totally upends life and plans. To me, plans feel like a pathway stretching out in front of me. I take one step and another and I feel like I am making progress on my purpose in life.

But these past months, I feel like my feet have been swept out from under me, and I've been carried off to some unknown place. With my feet set on some strange path, I am wondering what is my purpose right now? Perhaps you know what I mean. I don't have an answer for all this. And I can't tell you what purpose looks like for your life. But what I do have, I give you. I give you the story of Jonah.

The story of Jonah isn't long; you could read it all in 15 minutes. The passage for today begins like this: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it...'" Wait, wait, wait, hold on. The world of the Lord came to Jonah a second time? What was the first time? Well, that's the story.

Jonah was in his hometown the first time God called him to be a prophet, telling him to warn the people of Nineveh that they had to change their ways. Almost every time God calls a prophet, the prophet at first says: "No! I can't be a vessel for your will, God!" Isaiah, that poet among prophets, says he is a man of unclean lips, who was not pure enough to be God's messenger. Others

said, “I’m too young” or “I’m too old” or “I’m no public speaker.” But Jonah is unique among the prophets.

When God calls Jonah, he doesn’t object, he doesn’t make excuses, he doesn’t say anything, in fact. He just goes to the nearest port city and skips town. He gets on a ship bound for Tarsus, which is about as far away from Nineveh as you could get. It is as if God told Jonah to go prophesy in New York City, and he hopped in his car and started driving to Seattle. God lays a claim on Jonah’s life, and he tries to run away. From God.

So there he is on a boat to Tarsus out in the middle of the Mediterranean when what should happen, but a storm starts brewing. And the wind starts picking up, and the waves start kicking up, and the sailors start to get scared. And the storm that comes down is so fierce that the sailors think their ship is going to be torn apart. So they started throwing their cargo overboard — it doesn’t help. They each started praying to their own gods, hoping to appease whatever deity had sent this supernatural storm — it doesn’t help.

Finally, they ask their new passenger — have you done anything to bring this storm on us? And Jonah, who is apparently an honest guy, says, “I am fleeing from the presence of God, who is the Lord of the dry land and the seas. This storm is because of me, and if you throw me overboard you’ll all be fine.” Like I said, an honest guy. They threw Jonah overboard.

Now Jonah is floating there alone in the sea, probably reconsidering his life choices, when he is swallowed whole, by a whale. And this isn’t just any old whale, this is an express-whale to Nineveh. And after three dark slimy days and three dank squishy nights, Jonah is spewed up onto the beach, and, in a great feat of understatement, the Bible says: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying: ‘Jonah, go to Nineveh

and proclaim the word I tell you.’ ” Despite fleeing to Tarsus, despite a shipwreck, despite three days inside a fish, despite Jonah trying his best to run away from his purpose in life, here he is again. His feet are right on the path of God’s purpose.

In the book of Jonah we learn what happens when we don’t follow our purpose in life. God comes and gets us. If we have strayed from the paths of purpose, God runs the pathway right under our feet again. We can’t escape God’s purpose even if we try.

The things that used to make life make sense, they’re gone. Purpose can feel gone, too. When a job disappears, purpose is — gone. Or when a job is totally transformed into something unrecognizable, purpose is — gone. When family can’t gather and volunteer opportunities and travel can’t happen and school can’t meet, purpose is — gone. Life just turns into waiting around for life.

So if you’re sitting here today because your purpose in life feels gone, if don’t know what you’re going to do with your life anymore, or you know exactly what you should be doing and you just can’t; if you feel like you have gotten off track for the purpose of your life and worry you will never get back to it: I’ve got some good news for you!

There is no way to miss out on God’s purpose for your life. It can’t be done. You can’t escape God’s purpose for your life even if you try, so what chance is there that you might have accidentally missed it? You can’t escape God’s claim on your life even if you fled to the farthest corner of the earth, so what chance is there that a few months of staying in your own house would somehow frustrate God’s plans for you?

God knows where to find you. Your house. There is no way to miss out on God’s purpose for you, because that isn’t what God is like.

In the book of Jonah we learn what happens when you aren't following your purpose in life. God comes and gets you. If you have strayed from the paths of purpose, God runs the pathway right under your feet again. You can't escape God's purpose even if you try.

And God will never stop bothering you, never stop pursuing you until you are living it. And even then God will keep after you to make sure you stay on track. No matter what has gone on in your life, no matter what this pandemic has taken from you, no matter where you are right now, it is the starting line for God's purpose for you. You are no farther than one step away from that path.